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Assessing the Russian Government's Role in the Crisis over Ukraine – Response to Jack Matlock

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Jack F. Matlock, Jr., is a well-known expert on Russia who has produced insightful publications about the former Soviet Union. However, in recent years, Matlock has at times veered away from dispassionate scholarly analysis in an apparent attempt **to rationalize forceful actions** taken by Russian President Vladimir Putin vis-à-vis Russia's neighbors. This tendency is evident in the one-sided commentary Matlock produced for the *Krasno Analysis. Weekly Spotlight* series (No.2/2021) entitled "Ukraine: Tragedy of a Nation Divided."

Matlock offers a scathing description of Ukraine and asserts that "Ukraine is a state but not yet a nation." I have no idea what he means by this. **Ukraine as a nation has existed for several centuries.** Although scholars differ in specifying when the Ukrainian nation began to congeal, few would deny that it existed during the centuries of Polish-Lithuanian suzerainty over most of the territory that is now Ukraine. Matlock thus has it backward: Ukrainian nationhood has existed for several centuries,

whereas Ukrainian statehood has been much briefer and more precarious in the face of external hegemony and internal divisions.

It is true that **Ukrainians after 1991 failed to build a strong, cohesive state** and that this left Ukraine more vulnerable to Russian aggression than it should have been, but Matlock seems to imply that Putin's aggression is thereby justified.

He makes no mention of the many international agreements signed by Russia and Ukraine from December 1991 on, in which the Russian government pledged to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine based on the borders that existed when the Soviet Union broke apart. The Russian government's **annexation of Crimea and military interference in the Donbas region are blatant violations of those agreements**, but Matlock seems to regard Putin's actions as perfectly legitimate.

Matlock presents a tendentious account of the **Euromaidan revolution of 2013-2014**, often echoing Kremlin propaganda. In reality, the unrest that broke out in Kyiv in the evening of November 21, 2013, was a direct result of the Russian government's domineering posture toward Ukraine. In early September 2013, Ukrainian President **Viktor Yanukovich** announced that he would seek necessary legislation from the Ukrainian parliament to move ahead with a free trade association agreement with the European Union (EU). That announcement spurred Putin to exert relentless pressure on Yanukovich over the next two months, demanding that Ukraine eschew closer relations with the EU.

When Yanukovich reluctantly gave in to Putin's demands in November 2013, peaceful protests began a few days later in central Kyiv against Yanukovich's abrupt reversal. Bizarrely, Matlock claims that "violence started . . . in the Ukrainian nationalist west." In reality, violence began on 30 November when Yanukovich made the key mistake (under strong

pressure from Putin) of **ordering a violent crackdown by the Berkut anti-riot police on the protesters**. Until the *Berkut* tried to disperse the demonstrators through force, the protests had begun petering out and might well have ended altogether. But the heavy-handed crackdown, far from curbing the unrest, induced many other Ukrainians to come out onto the streets.

Matlock offers an equally distorted account of how the Maidan revolution proceeded and claims that pro-Moscow residents of **Crimea, Donetsk, and Luhansk** were so angry about the outcome of the revolution that they launched “a rebellion” in the spring of 2014 against the interim government in Ukraine. In reality, the whole course of events in southern and eastern Ukraine after **Yanukovich’s ouster** was shaped by Russian troops. Russian military forces seized Crimea and staged a farcical “referendum” on the annexation of the territory.

In the spring of 2014, Russian military personnel instigated **warfare in Donbas**, and the Russian government has kept the armed conflict there festering ever since through proxy forces and through intervention by Russian soldiers when needed.

It is true that in February-March 2014 many residents of Donbas were unhappy about events in Kyiv. But opinion polls taken at the time and the observations of journalists and other observers contradict Matlock’s assertion that what happened in Donbas in the spring of 2014 was “a rebellion.” The **armed conflict there was initiated and fueled by the Russian army** and would not have begun in the absence of Russian military intervention.

Matlock throughout his article gives the impression that Russian leaders lack agency and that everything they do is **simply a response to aggressive Western policies**. No one would deny that Western actions

— particularly the misguided wars against Serbia in 1999, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011 — can have an impact on Russian policy, just as Russia's actions can have an impact on Western policy.

Nonetheless, Matlock overlooks the fact that **Russia's domineering posture toward Ukraine and other former Soviet republics began almost as soon as the Soviet Union formally ended** on 26 December 1991.

In the 30 years since then, under both Boris Yeltsin and Putin, Russia has bullied, intimidated, destabilized, violated the sovereignty of, and intervened in other former Soviet republics, especially **Georgia, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan**, whenever those countries have been led by rulers the Russian authorities have disliked.

As soon as the Soviet Union broke apart, the Russian government sponsored armed separatist movements in **Georgia's regions of South Ossetia (1992)** and **Abkhazia (1993)**, enabling them to break away and establish de facto independence. Afterward, thousands of Russian troops remained deployed in these regions — over the objections of the Georgian government — to safeguard the pro-Russian separatists against any potential attempts by the Georgian authorities to regain control.

In **Moldova in 1992** the Russian government also deployed thousands of troops to help the **Transnistrian region** break away from the Moldovan government's control. Russian troops have remained stationed in Transnistria to this day, despite repeated demands by the Moldovan government for the troops to be withdrawn.

Russia also sent troops to **Tajikistan** in the early 1990s to sway the outcome of a civil war in Moscow's favor, and Russian forces continue to exert vastly disproportionate influence there even now.

Under both Yeltsin and Putin, **Russia has supported the entrenchment of authoritarian regimes in neighboring states** and opposed upheavals and popular unrest directed against authoritarian rulers. In the same way that Putin strongly backed the decision in May 2005 by the Uzbek leader, **Islam Karimov**, to employ ruthless violence against a rebellion, so too the Russian authorities did their best in both 2004 and 2014 to oppose the advent of a genuinely democratic government in Ukraine.

Even Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014, though undertaken heavy-handedly, was not a true departure in Russian policy. **The roots of the move dated back more than 20 years.** Crimea had a popularly-backed separatist movement in the early 1990s, and its leader, **Yuri Meshkov**, won a landslide victory in a free election for the Crimean presidency in early 1994.

Yeltsin's government actively supported Meshkov, and the only thing that brought an end to Russia's backing for him was the victory of **Leonid Kuchma** in Ukraine's presidential election in July 1994. Kuchma was a leader Yeltsin liked and wanted to help. Hence, the Russian authorities stopped supporting and inciting the Crimean separatist movement, and Kuchma steadily clamped down on Meshkov, eventually expelling him to Russia in March 1995. That expulsion put an end to the separatist movement in Crimea for nearly 20 years.

If Kuchma's opponent in the July 1994 Ukrainian presidential election, **Leonid Kravchuk**, had won, the Russian government almost certainly would have continued to back Meshkov, who had indicated he would seek the incorporation of Crimea into Russia. Yeltsin might well have attempted in the mid-1990s what Putin did in March 2014.

Matlock in his commentary berates Western countries but says nothing about the Russian government's long-standing hegemonic posture toward Ukraine. Having consistently gotten away with mistreating and violating the sovereignty of Ukraine and other neighboring states from 1992 on, Kremlin leaders have felt they enjoy what then-President **Dmitry Medvedev** in August 2008 called a "**zone of interest**" (a de facto backyard) in the former USSR, above all Ukraine.

Thus, **it is incorrect to portray Russian policy in Ukraine over the past seven years as having been driven by the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the EU.** Putin has cited Western "encroachments" against Russia as an excuse for his annexation of Crimea and sponsorship of the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine, but in fact, as **Stephen Kotkin** pointed out in an article in mid-2016, the wellsprings of Russian policy have been predominantly internal:

[I]t is not necessary to have supported every aspect of Western policy in recent decades to see Putin's evolving stance less as a reaction to external moves than as the latest example of a deep, recurring pattern driven by internal factors. What precluded post-Soviet Russia from joining Europe as just another country or forming an (inevitably) unequal partnership with the United States was the country's abiding great-power pride and sense of special mission.¹

Even **if NATO had ceased to exist after 1991 and the EU had stayed away from Eastern Europe**, neither Yeltsin nor Putin would have been inclined to deal with Ukraine as an equal partner.

¹ Stephen Kotkin, "Russia's Perpetual Geopolitics: Putin Returns to the Historical Pattern," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (May/June 2016), pp. 2-9.

In December 2021, Putin equated the Soviet Union with “historical Russia” and argued that Moscow’s loss of dominion over Ukraine in late 1991 meant that “what had been amassed over a thousand years was suddenly lost.” Having earlier characterized the breakup of the Soviet Union as **“the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [20th] century,”** Putin claimed in December 2021 that Ukraine’s separation from Russia was a **“huge tragedy”** that he aspired to undo. Matlock neglects to mention any of this.

One final point about Matlock’s commentary that is especially objectionable is his apparent belief that **two wrongs make a right** (the “whataboutism” of the Soviet era). He cites what he regards as bad behavior by the United States and suggests that this alleged bad behavior justifies Russia's misdeeds.

Putin and his acolytes would certainly endorse such claims, but surely the approach used by outside experts and scholars should be more rigorous. **The Russian government's extensive and unsavory military interference in Ukraine since early 2014** is amply deserving of condemnation, without exculpatory rationalizations.

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